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RELS 335.01: Early Christian Thought

Paul A. Dietrich

University of Montana - Missoula, paul.dietrich@umontana.edu

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RS 335 Early Christian Thought

Paul A. Dietrich
Office: LA 145
Phone: x2805
Office Hours: TTh 2-3
and by appointment

Autumn Semester, 1998
TTh 9:40-11:00
FOR 301
3 credits

A survey of Christian thought and culture in the Mediterranean basin from the New Testament until the early sixth century. Topics will include:

- * the bible and interpretation - the formation of the canon of scripture and schools of exegesis or commentary;
- * Christianity and classical culture - the dialectic of appropriation and critique;
- * martyrdom, asceticism, and monasticism - imitatio Christi and the pursuit of perfection;
- * orthodoxy and heresy - the boundaries of Christian community, (suffering and agency - from martyrdom to persecution);
- * narratives, creeds and the development of doctrine;
- * topics in Christian theology (God and creation, the Trinity, Christology, sacraments, church, nature and grace, reason and revelation);
- * human person as imago Dei and microcosmos - mimesis, anagogy, and conceptions of human nature and virtue;
- * cultural and theological dimensions of image, type, symbol, and architecture - a Christian aesthetics (abstract form and spiritual content);
- * genres of religious literature - poems, aphorisms, hymns, treatises, hagiography, autobiography, creeds, manuals of instruction, rules, letters.

There will be extensive reading in primary sources in translation including short selections and complete works.

Required Texts

Augustine, Confessions, Henry Chadwick, trans., (Oxford)
The Wisdom of the Desert, Thomas Merton, trans., (New Directions)
Chadwick, Henry, The Early Church, (Penguin)
RS 335 FACPAC

Course Syllabus

I. Introduction. Foundations and Sources of the Christian Tradition

1. The New Testament and Early Christian Literature
2. From Hebrew Bible to Old Testament
3. "The Spoils of Egypt" - Classical Philosophy and Letters

II. Ancient Christianity - Growth and Persecution

1. "The Apostolic Life" - Early Christian Order and Worship
The Didache
2. "The Blood of the Martyrs..."
Ignatius of Antioch, "Letter to the Romans"
Passion of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas
3. "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem" - the Apologists
Justin Martyr, Apology
Letter to Diognetus

III. Canon, Creed, Community - Faith and Order in Early Christian Thought

1. The Gnostic Challenge and Irenaeus's Reply
"The Hymn of the Pearl"
Irenaeus, Against Heresies (Marcion, Valentinus)
2. Orthodox Christian Gnosis - the School of Alexandria
Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis; Paedagogus;
Protrepticus
Origen, On First Principles; On the Song of Songs
3. "Begotten not made" - the Arian Crisis and the Nicene Creed
Arius, "Letter to Eusebius"
Nicene Creed 325/381
4. "Sponsa Christi" - Cyprian and the Donatists on the Church
Cyprian, On the Unity of the Church

IV. The Golden Age of Greek and Syriac Patristic Thought

1. "God became Man..." - The Formula of Redemption
Athanasius, On the Incarnation
2. Early Christian Paideia and the Cappadocians
Basil of Caesarea, "On Reading Greek Literature"
Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses
3. Garments of Words / Robes of Glory: The Ladder of Symbols in Ephrem the Syrian
Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns

V. Christianity and Classical Culture in the Latin West

1. Early Latin Theology from Tertullian to Lactantius
Lactantius, Divine Institutes
2. The Golden Age - Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine and Hilary (Ambrose), "Splendor paternae gloriae"
Augustine, Confessions; On the Trinity;
On Genesis XII
3. The City of God: Early Latin Poetry, Art and Architecture
Paulinus of Nola, "The Word of the Cross"
Prudentius, "Hymn for 25 December";
Spiritual Combat (Psychomachia)
Fortunatus, "The Banners of the King";
"To Bishop Felix at Eastertide"

- (Constantinian basilicas and early Byzantine art)
4. The Last Roman - Boethius
Consolation of Philosophy

VI. Flight into the Desert - Monastic Beginnings East and West

1. First Monk - The Life of Antony and the Eremitical Ideal
Athanasius, The Life of Antony
2. "The Desert a City" - Cenobitical Life and the Sayings of the Elders (Apophthegmata)
Thomas Merton, trans., The Wisdom of the Desert
3. The Monastic Theology of Evagrius Ponticus
Evagrius, Praktikos; Chapters on Prayer
4. Latin Monasticism from Cassian to Cassiodorus
Sulpicius Severus, Life of St. Martin
Benedict of Nursia, Rule 1-7, 53, 73
Cassiodorus, Divine Letters

Course Requirements

1. Class attendance and participation
2. Timely reading of assigned reading
3. Midterm exam (Tuesday, 20 October)
and Final Exam (Wednesday, 16 December)
4. Several brief essays (3-5 pages)
5. Optional term paper in lieu of final exam

(If class size and student interest permit a seminar format, we may partially replace written assignments with student presentations.)